


Academic Paper

Moving Mentorship to Opportunity for Women University Presidents

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Abstract

Women remain underrepresented in U.S. university presidential positions. Mentorship is a tool used to support women in gaining access to the position. In this qualitative study, eight U.S. women university presidents of public doctoral granting universities were interviewed about their mentorship experiences. Interviews were then coded and analyzed to understand the mentorship construct. Findings from the data show an interconnection between mentorship, informal relationships, and opportunity. Participants also gained greater support from male mentors versus female mentors, and from informal mentorship versus formal mentorship programs. Mentorship connected to opportunity is imperative in building the administrative careers of women leaders.

Keywords

women's leadership, mentoring women, university leadership,

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Introduction

Women are underrepresented in U.S. university presidential leadership. For example, in the United States, historical data shows a slow path for women to the position. In 1986, women held 9.5% of all U.S. university presidencies. The number increased to 21.1% in 2001, and 26.4% in 2011 (American Council on Education, 2007; 2012). According to the 2017 report by the American Council on Education (ACE) (2017), only 30% of all American college and university presidents were women.

How does a woman become a university president? The university presidency is the highest administrative position in U.S. postsecondary organizations (Reis, 2015). For U.S. institutions, the path to the presidency is a traditional route through academic affairs (American Council on Education, 2012; 2017). Thus, a woman begins her career as an assistant professor, and seeks promotion to associate and full professor. She collects administrative credentials through committee work and builds those credentials to eventually move to an official administrative title of

program chair, dean, and eventually chief academic officer. Although the career path may differ slightly for each person, the need for administrative experience remains central to the resume (Metcalf & Slaughter, 2008).

Mentorship can be a helpful tool in supporting women who negotiate the move to administration (Ensher & Murphy, 2010; Ghosh & Reio, 2013). A female faculty member opting-in to administration faces a critical career moment. According to Scanlon (1997), multiple mentors in a female administrator's career can be helpful in negotiating career decisions. Mentors also can support women in crossing social networks, and building social capital outside the boundaries of gender (Eagly & Carli, 2007a, 2007b; Williams & Dempsey, 2014). The division between psychosocial mentors and career mentors (Hansman, 1998; Mullen, 2016) and the points where each is necessary, is also important to the mentorship discussion.

This study describes the mentorship experiences of eight women university presidents of public doctoral granting U.S. institutions. Although we focus on the United States, findings are relevant to tertiary education worldwide (Fitzgerald, 2012; Morley, 2013; Winchester & Browning, 2015). The purpose of the study was to understand how mentorship operated within the career experiences of these eight women, and how their experiences connect to the literature on mentorship. Understanding how women experienced mentorship in their careers provides information for women's mentorship programs, and ways organizations can best support women moving into leadership positions. Implications for practice are discussed.

Literature

Mentoring requires a relationship between two individuals. The idea of mentoring is rooted in mythological literature and the story of Mentor, a trusted friend of King Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus must leave to fight the battle of Troy, and entrusts the care of his son, Telemachus, to Mentor, who serves as a guide and teacher to Telemachus. Under Mentor's wisdom and care, Telemachus is taught to seek answers for himself. Mentor, who is actually the goddess Athena in disguise, is portrayed as wise and shrewd in her approach to guiding Telemachus to self-learning (Bynum, 2015; Mullen, 2005). Although the story's historical origins can be interpreted broadly through a political, sociological, or historical lens, Homer's story serves as the springboard for the word mentor, and its setting in the literature on mentorship.

Mentoring is described as a dyad, or a relationship between two individuals. However, there is a myriad of definitions specific to the construct of the relationship (Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, & Wilbanks, 2011). Most researchers agree mentoring can be formal, informal, or a combination of the two (Bynum, 2015; Haggard et al., 2011; Mullen, 2005; 2016; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Many systems have adopted a technical approach to mentoring in which a specific person with designated expertise is assigned to mentor a newer, less experienced protégé. Mullen (2005) described technical mentoring as a short term, needs based mentoring relationship. Information is translated down to the protégé through a hierarchical structure. In addition, technical mentoring mirrors organizational efficiency, and thus, lends itself to administrative oversight. One of the challenges of this type of mentoring program is the place of power, and the relational tensions that come from position inequality (Brown, 2005; Bynum, 2015; Mullen, 2005; 2016).

Informal, or alternative mentoring, describes a relational process with shared construction in knowledge making (Mullen, 2005; 2016). The mentor and protégé share common beliefs that inform the boundaries of the relationship, and promote an equal sharing of ideas. Informal mentoring can support women in career development, and often forms organically within organizations that do not have organized mentoring programs in place (Bynum, 2015). According to Freire (1997), the complex identities of humans, and the requirement that the mentor bring specific knowledge to the relationship, brings the ethical consideration of the mentor/protégé

relationship to surface. Each member has a level of accountability in sharing and receiving information. Thus, in both formal or informal mentoring programs, the essence of the relationship requires continuous attention in terms of power distribution (Freire, 1997; Mullen, 2005; 2016).

From the organizational viewpoint, mentoring supports socialization. Mentors help protégés in learning the normative behaviors and relationships within the organization. In turn, protégés gain knowledge that allows them to develop their careers. According to Allen, Chao, Eby and Bauer (2017), the intersection of mentoring and socialization in organizational literature requires the investigation of the specifics of the relationship. For example, how does the relationship between a mentor and protégé affect the other units or team members? Or, more importantly, are mentoring programs deemed successful because high-performing individuals are most often recruited for a mentoring program? The causal connection between who gets chosen for a mentoring opportunity, and measurements of effective behavior marked against tangent personal qualities, is missing in the mentoring literature. The relational and social applications of the mentoring dyad connect to the structure of power and ways that power replicates as an institutionalized form (Swartz, 1997).

Methodology

Eight women presidents of U.S. doctoral granting institutions participated in this study. The small number in the sample required a qualitative methodology (Creswell, 2012; Riessman, 2008). Congruent with Creswell (2012), we created research questions to guide analysis of the data.

Research Questions

1. How does gender inform the mentor/protégé relationship?
2. How does mentorship connect to leadership opportunity?
3. How does mentorship support administrative success?

We also ascribed to Creswell (2012), and Richards & Morse's (2012) *model for methodological congruence*. Qualitative study should be focused and data driven, even if the data are derived differently than in quantitative research. For the study, the eight-woman university presidents were interviewed using an interview protocol reflective of the research questions (Seidman, 2006). The study was completed with approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the researchers' university. The interviews were audio recorded and completed in-person on the campus of each participant. Meeting each participant at her university provided textural data through artefacts and field notes that supported the findings of the study (Riessman, 2008).

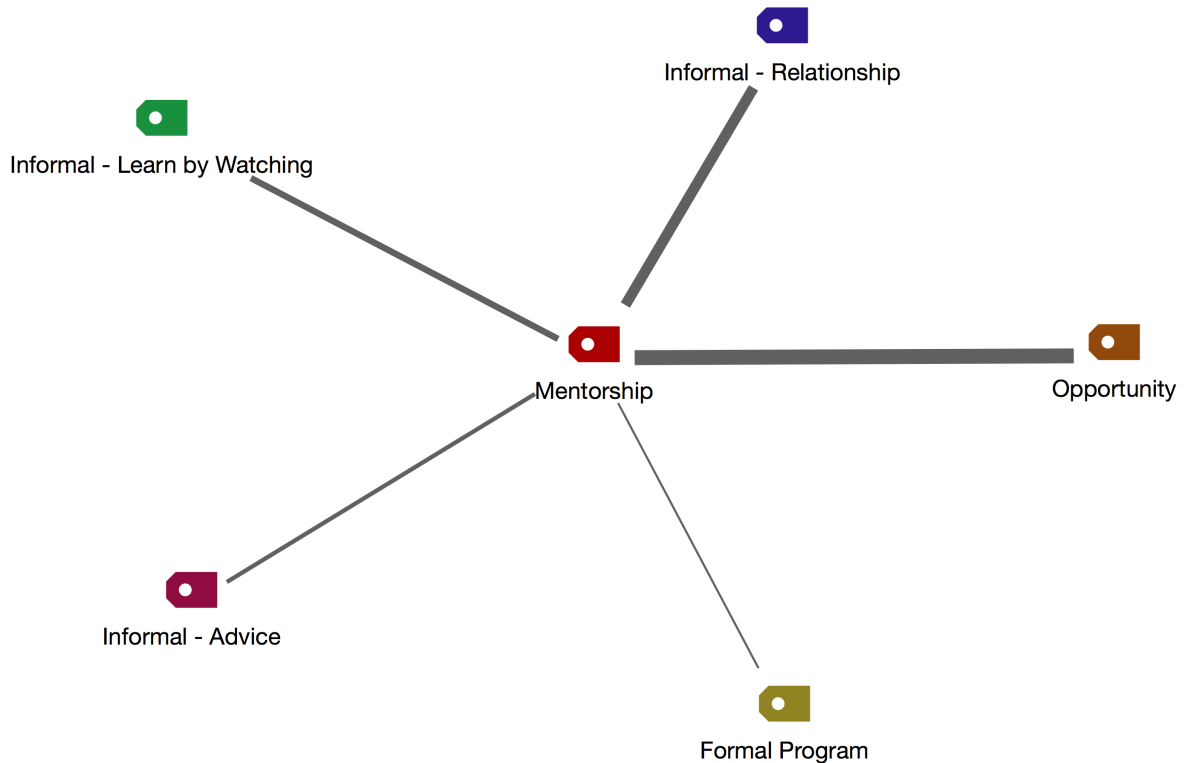
Interviews were transcribed and coded via MAXQDA software. We used first cycle coding (Saldaña, 2016) to identify the number of mentorship connections described by each participant as evidenced in the data. This resulted in 54 narrative segments in which participants mentioned the word mentor or described an experience congruent with the mentor/protégé relationship noted in the literature.

In second cycle coding, the 54 narrative segments were separated into 113 shorter data segments for coding and pattern analysis. The 113 data segments were then coded and synthesized into two descriptive categories: Mentorship [Receive Support] and Mentorship [Give Support] to reflect the direction of the mentoring relationship. To ensure reliability in our analysis, we followed the protocol of narrative research, and utilized analytic memos (Creswell, 2012; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2016) to maintain accuracy of codes within each participant's experience.

To further enhance reliability of our findings, we linked the codes via MAXMAP to create two models for cross-comparison and interpretation. The Code-Subcode-Segments Model (Figure 1)

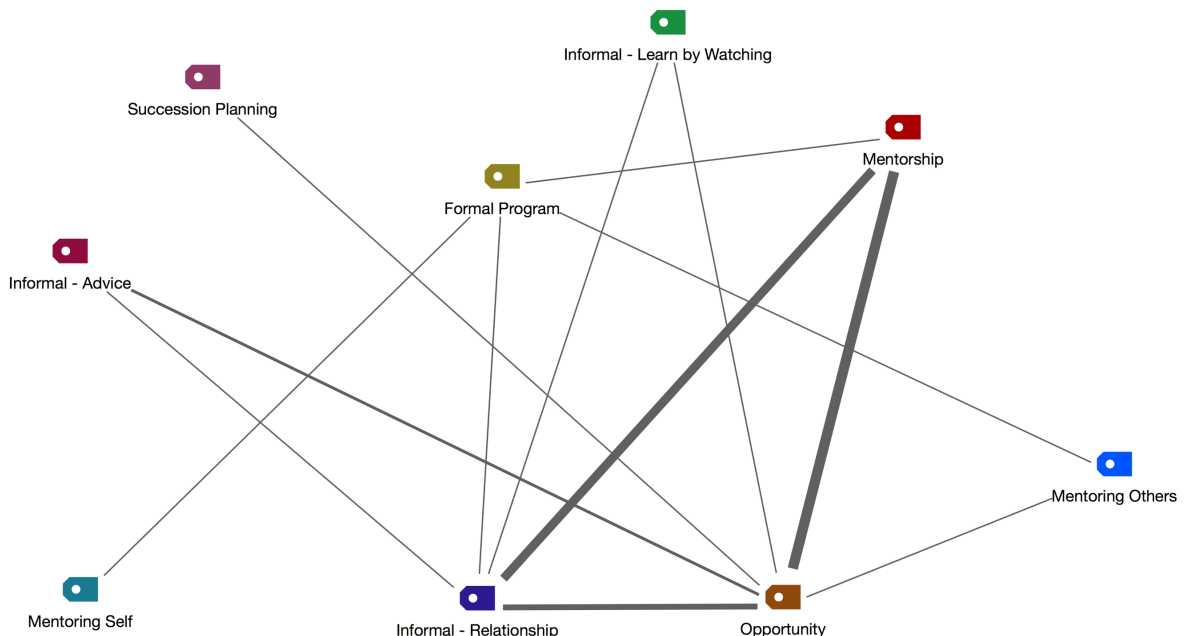
ranked codes by relevance as related to Mentorship. Analysis showed codes clustered in two areas: Opportunity and Informal Relationships.

Figure 1. MAXQDA Code Subcode Segments Model



We then created a Code Co-Occurrence Model (Figure 2) to check the intersection of codes, and the frequency of the intersection. The Code Co-Occurrence Model showed the strongest interconnection between Mentorship, Informal Relationship, and Opportunity.

Figure 2. MAXQDA Code Co-Occurrence Model



The models were then examined in relation to the interview data to provide context for the report of the findings.

Theoretical Framework

For the study, the theoretical lens of the French philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu (1986; 1989), was used. According to Bourdieu, the social world is built with objective structures that both guide and constrain individual practice. Within the environment, actors operate with a “twofold social genesis” (Bourdieu, 1989, p.14) of social perception or *habitus*, and social classes, referred to as *fields*. According to Bourdieu, habitus can shape individual action, and both form and inform individual thinking. Thus, a woman operating in a patriarchal environment remains subliminally aware of her outside status. Specifically, in education, where women are underrepresented in top administrative positions, women are challenged to see themselves as leaders in this framework (Hoyt, 2005).

Bourdieu (1986; 1989) acknowledged that individuals can exercise strategy in moving outside their perceived habitus. However, it is not a matter of pure determination. Movement into the acquired culture takes risk and more than a single action or decision. Rather, it is a sustained effort that capitalizes over time (Swartz, 1997). Thus, for women accessing high level leadership, transitioning fields requires intentional support from those with social authority. Connecting Bourdieu with the mentorship construct creates a dynamic framework to examine how women experience the phenomenon.

Findings

Findings from the study are reported in narrative form. At the time of data collection, the eight participants in this study each led a large public doctoral granting institution. The U.S. universities at which these women led are public and well-known. The purpose of the study was to capture their mentorship experience through interviews. Thus, the data are participant’s own words. Our institutional IRB prohibits us from revealing details that might reflect their, or their institutional, identity.

Each of the participants in this study described having two or more significant individuals serve as mentors. Six of the eight participants used the word “mentor” to describe the relationship, and two participants interchanged “mentor” and “role model.” In total, 23 mentors were identified. Participants reported a greater degree of support from informal versus formal mentorship relationships, and acknowledged forming more than one mentor relationship over the course of her career. Of the 23 mentors described, 18 were male and 3 were female.

At the time of the mentor/protégé relationship, the mentor was in a higher administrative position than the participant, and was identified as a program chair, dean, or university leader. The participant identified herself as a graduate student, faculty, dean, or university administrator. The mentor/protégé relationships formed early in some participant careers and later in others. For example, when asked if she thought she would ever become a university president of a land grant university, President A responded, “Well, first of all, I had fabulous mentors in grad school. So let me just frame that out.” President B was a full professor when she met a dean who “became a very good friend and mentor.” Thus, mentor relationships began at different points in each woman’s career.

According to the participants, the mentor relationship emerged informally or as a collegial connection. However, key to the relationship dynamic was the “ask,” or the point where the mentor directed the participant to take action. The “ask” was more than a simple request or suggestion, it was a stronger effort on the part of the mentor to capitalize an opportunity for a participant. So, the

mentor identified a position for which he or she felt the participant might meet success, and in turn, mentored her to manage the challenge. The participants described the point of “being asked” to take an administrative position, and the support to pursue that position, as pivotal to individual leadership development.

President C described the initial ask, by her college dean, who was male, to take on a special role. She said, “Shortly after tenure, the dean asked me to assume a special role for women in business, because we had challenges recruiting and retaining women.” Her narrative continued as she connected that single opportunity to multiple opportunities that bridged into recognizable leadership roles.

Then I did some more committee work, did some campus-wide work, and became an Associate Dean. Then after six years, I was asked to lead a campus accreditation committee. I worked with three chancellors during about an 11-year time span. I got close to leadership and watched leadership, and did some service roles that were kind of high profile on campus. When the provost left, I was asked to be interim.

For the women in this study, the mentor/protégé relationship remained fluid, and vacillated between mentorship and sponsorship. Mentors share tacit organizational information and career encouragement whereas sponsors are proactive in recruitment and job advancement (Haggard, et al., 2011; Helms, et al., 2016; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). For these women, mentors were supportive at a specific career point, and helpful in directing career opportunities. However, the relationship fell short of true sponsorship because it was informal, short term, or in most instances, happenstance. Sponsorship requires that the mentor have organizational power that he or she is willing to leverage for a mentee’s career. In the narratives of these women, mentors held power through position, but the woman president was responsible for building her resume, and making herself look “ready.” The mentor highlighted opportunity and offered counsel but it was the participant’s responsibility to learn from the experience, and take her next step. In short, mentorship was helpful; but, the participant was the sponsor of her career. As President C said when describing mentors and role models, “I think whether consciously or unconsciously, we’ve sorted out, and each woman has to figure it out her own way.”

President D shared her narrative of being a faculty member who served on committees. After a committee meeting, the chair of the committee spoke to her about moving her career forward.

He had gotten to know me for a few years and said, ‘I’ve been watching you serve on this committee, and I think that you will get bored here because you’ve been on all the important committees; and, I can tell that you really like new challenges.’

He asked her to consider looking for a job as a department chair. To support her efforts, he said that when she found a position that interested her, he would nominate her for the position versus her applying on her own. She said:

Because he said, for this level, you do not go and nominate yourself. It is better to be nominated because you want to appear to be known by other people and respected by other people. So, he nominated me for a few; and, I went on several interviews at different places.

For President D, it was less about getting a promotion, and more about the process of securing the promotion. The opportunity to interview was compelling but the learning from the opportunity is what she credits as forming her administrative career path. The “ask” to do something capitalized into broader and sustainable career momentum. She concluded

I do not know how [interviews] I was really qualified for, and how many of them, you know, they wanted to check the box of having interviewed a woman. But, the interesting thing for me was

that it was my first inkling that I really enjoyed learning more about being asked questions about the future of [science] rather than, the future of my own narrow discipline.

For women, the path to leadership is non-linear. Women move through a series of stops and starts, and career movement mirrors Eagly and Carli's labyrinth (2007b, 2007c; Carli & Eagly, 2016) rather than a direct corporate climb. This means that a woman may be stalled in a position as she negotiates ways to access new career experiences (Jo, 2008). For the women in this study, the support of a mentor with knowledge and power served as an important tool for moving past barriers. It was not that the participants did not know that opportunities existed. Rather, it was moving themselves to a place of access. As President E noted about an early mentor who supported her career,

I kind of always knew it was possible because he told me it was. And, you know, it makes a big difference having somebody saying to you, you could do this.

President F recounted her path to the presidency, and the support she received from a male associate provost who sent her to represent him at a governance meeting where she was challenged for her gender.

One of the associate provosts sent me to a [governance] meeting to replace him one day. And I got there, and as the person came in, who was a woman, helping the person chair this meeting – it was all the representatives from about ten universities – and she said ‘well, Dr. So and So will have a replacement today’ and I heard that, and I waved my hand and I said ‘I’m Dr. So and So’s replacement.’ She just looked at me, and she says ‘well, I never expected it to be a woman.’

The woman went back to her university and told the associate provost what had happened.

He said, ‘Well, I’ll fix them. I’ll put you as my permanent replacement.’ And, so, lo and behold, he did.

In telling her story, President F recounted her career of administrative experience that prepared her for the role of the university presidency, and then returned to the beginning of her narrative, and the opportunity created by the male associate provost who named her his permanent replacement. She attributed the “networking that took place, and being on that committee, and the mentors that I had along the way, most of them men, of course”, as critical moments in her leadership journey.

According to the presidents in the study, male mentors were more common than female mentors. Men held the administrative positions that could provide opportunity, and exhibited confidence in directing participants on career advancement. This finding is congruent with the literature on mentorship and the findings that women experience a higher degree of compensation and career advancement from male mentors (Allen et. al., 2017; Bynum, 2015; Haggard, et. al., 2011; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Searby & Tripses, 2006). In reviewing the male mentor/female protégé relationship through the theoretical lens of Bourdieu (1986), the practical element of mentoring is interpreted through broader sociological understandings and gives an understanding of how women move into leadership positions.

In the United States, university leadership has a patriarchal history. In 2001, women represented only 23% of all U.S. college presidents, and 13.8% of U.S. presidents leading a doctoral granting institution (ACE, 2012). In 2016, women held only 30% of all U.S. college presidencies and 21.8 % at doctoral granting institutions (ACE, 2017). The strong representation of male leaders means that women are minority members crossing into university leadership.

According to Bourdieu (1986; 1989), moving into a non-dominant culture requires credentials that are built over time. For the women in the study, administrative credentials were essential for the

move into the presidential position. The women in the study most often gained those credentials through mentorship by a male mentor in a position of power. Congruent with Ragins and Sundstrom (1989) and Brown (2005), this study supports the theory that individuals in power make powerful mentors. As noted by President G:

I worked with a talented university president. It was his fourth presidency. He was a very experienced fellow. We hit it off really well, worked very well together. I really enjoyed working with him, and he groomed me to be a president.

Interestingly, male mentors also provided learning on leadership and gender. Men and women exhibit different leadership styles and effective leadership is understood through follower perception. Thus, men often exhibit a strong agentic leadership style whereas women are expected to be communal (Carli, 2015; Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly & Karau, 2002). One challenge for women in leadership is maintaining an authoritative yet authentic voice. Understanding how leadership worked in regard to gender proved a valuable lesson for President H. She said

You know, the chancellor, I worked with him the whole time and he was a great mentor for me. We got along great. He was brilliant. He was literally a rocket scientist and a very caring person. Really loved the university. But he was very top down, very hierarchical, and in his later years was very impatient with the faculty. He loved faculty but he was impatient with them and started to, kind of, ram things down their throats.

She said that she could “see their reactions. No one really likes that.” She said that when she became a university president, she took a different approach to faculty relationships. “I worked with them to build ideas,” she said. She acknowledged that a team approach worked better, not only because it was a better leadership style for the situation, but because as a woman, it gave her greater credibility.

President H also learned leadership skills from another male university administrator. She described him as having “a large personality” and decisive manner. She said that she would not do everything the way he did because he “had his own strengths. I wouldn’t do it the way [he] did it, you know, because we’re different people.” However, watching him did help her develop her executive decision-making skills, and strengthened her ability to lead a large research university.

The enormity of making those big decisions. He was a great mentor for me in how to make the courageous choices, the difficult choices, in terms of taking risks. That was the big thing that he taught me.

In connection to power, it is important to note that the women in the study did not choose their mentors. The male mentors chose them. This aligns with literature (Brown, 2005; Bynum, 2015; Haggard, et al., 2011) on mentor/protégé relationships and supports one of the challenges of informal mentoring relationships (Allen et al., 2017; Mullen, 2016). The process of who gets chosen and who does not, especially in the balance of power, means that certain individuals may remain unchosen. Who these individuals are, and how their talent is organizationally merited, makes equality in mentorship elusive. In the construct of leadership, a male mentor may choose a female protégé who mirrors his own leadership style. Thus, Freire (1997) is correct in his placement of power as a central theme in the mentorship conversation. As President F said:

There has to be male allies for women to be successful. It takes men to be allies and supporters. But you know, to formalize the idea that you have to make allies who are very supportive and willing to be at workshops, and willing to speak out, all of that is helpful.

In the discussion of power and mentorship, it is important to note ways participants were mentoring other women. Although mentoring others did not emerge as a significant theme in the analysis, four

of the eight participants described efforts to build leadership capacity among women. President H said

I have these conversations with the junior faculty now. I think a lot about succession planning, and you know, I do think that part of my role will be to, quite honestly, create the next succession of academic leadership at this university. I spend a lot of time talking to faculty who are kind of aspiring to make the leap and helping them consider whether that is the right choice for them or not. I have a lot of those conversations.

President A talked about her example as a woman president of a land grant institution, and how being a woman in the position might inspire younger female leaders.

I have had a number of both students, graduate students, and faculty say [a woman president] suddenly changed their perspective on administration and the role of women. I had some graduate students see me in a restaurant, and they had tears in their eyes. It meant so much to them to have a woman leader.

She said that she engages with female faculty and students, and “chats” about career paths in higher education administration. She said, “It’s actually providing an open opportunity that it shouldn’t be that only men should think about this.”

President G discussed the difference between formal versus informal mentorship programs. “We send people off to these national conferences, all that kind of stuff,” she said. She continued, “over time, I’ve just become more and more skeptical of these single group programs because I don’t think they are having the outcome that we need. She then described an associate dean who had benefited from informal mentoring.

There’s a really dynamic woman, who’s an associate dean for academic programs. She’ll be a superstar. But people have mentored her. You know, I take her out to lunch. But she’ll be really good.

The women presidents recognized the importance of mentorship, and made an effort to engage informally with aspiring female leaders. Purposeful conversations, and single or small group interactions, supported mentorship efforts. All the participants named formal programs and conferences on their campuses related to developing women’s leadership. However, in regard to mentorship, the presidents reported a higher degree of satisfaction with one-to-one mentoring relationships.

Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation of the study was the small sample size of eight U.S. woman presidents. The study also focused on women leading universities in the United States. It is possible that the data and findings could differ based on university hierarchy in different countries.

Implications for Research and Practice

The results of the study supported earlier findings that women gain a greater amount of career support from male mentors than from female mentors (Brown, 2005; Bynum, 2015; Haggard et al, 2011; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). In the context of the U.S. university presidency, women presidents report a high degree of support from male mentors (Brown, 2005). One explanation of the phenomenon is likely the low number of women administrators available to serve as mentors to other women. In addition, as interpreted through Bourdieu’s (1986; 1989) lens of cultural capital,

and the finding that women gain more from mentorship connected to opportunity versus mentorship for the sake of the practice, there is a need for diverse mentoring (Mullen, 2016). Although the number of U.S. women presidents is increasing, they may not yet be in a position to create opportunities for other women.

Women are moving into high leadership positions, and exercising solid skills of leadership. Women leaders also are supporting other women (Brown, 2005; Bynum, 2015). However, from a practical standpoint, formal mentorship programs for women might be more successful when linked to specific opportunities. Organizations are quick to advertise mentorship programs as a path for women's leadership. However, without directed opportunity and accessibility to positions, it is unclear if these programs actually improve a woman's career. Further study is needed to connect mentoring and sponsorship (Helms, et al., 2016), and how sponsorship can inform a higher degree of leadership success.

This study provides findings on how women experience mentorship in their administrative careers. The findings show an interconnection between mentorship, informal relationships, and opportunity as related to a successful leadership path. The interview data from the participants provides context to the mentorship experience, and further explains the construct of mentorship as connected to relationships and opportunity within the careers of U.S. women presidents. The findings from this study offer a lens into ways higher education institutions can augment practice and create effective mentorship opportunities for women.

Universities should consider building mentorship programs that connect to career advancement. Mentorship is better valued when it leads to a specific career goal. Regardless of how mentorship is experienced, women reap higher benefits from a tangible outcome. Second, universities should build mentorship time and training into administrative positions. If women are going to mentor other women, they need support for their efforts. Designating specific resources to informal mentoring efforts may formalize the effects for female leaders. Last, integrate men and women in mentoring future women leaders. Mentoring programs should include discussions of power and position, and include administrators with power in the mentoring process.

Examining the mentorship process makes clear the benefits of the practice. Higher education should examine organizational practices that capitalize mentorship for female leaders. In the end, mentorship can be a valuable program tool that supports leadership diversity.

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